Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework

Vyacheslav Karpov

It has been more than a decade since Peter Berger famously introduced the concept of desecularization to denote a variety of manifestations of the worldwide resurgence of religion. He described desecularization as counter-secularization and offered an innovative view of the vitality of religion vis-à-vis global modernity. Studying the interplay of secularizing and counter-secularizing trends and forces, Berger wrote, is a most important task of the sociology of religion.

Looking back at Berger’s energetic formulations, one could expect that they would inspire an explosive growth of studies focusing on counter-secularizing trends and attempting to uncover desecularization patterns across cultures and societies. This would have meant a massive shift of focus in research within the sociology of religion. The shift, however, has been slow to emerge. Recent studies of the resurgence of religion and its influence on societies worldwide have generated mounting evidence in support of

VYACHESLAV KARPOV (BA, St. Petersburg State University [Russia]; PhD, Ohio State University) is a professor of sociology, Western Michigan University. He is the co-author of *Orthodoxy, Islam and Religious Tolerance in Post-Atheist Russia* (forthcoming). His articles have appeared in *Sociology of Religion, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Religion, State and Society, Social Forces,* and other journals. Special interests include: comparative sociology of religion, social theory, and religious and political tolerance. The author is infinitely grateful to professors Chris Marsh and Elena Lisovskaya. This article would not have been written without their encouragement, support, and advice.

2. Ibid., 7.
Berger’s desecularization thesis. Yet, there has been remarkably little effort to conceptualize desecularization and heuristically apply this theoretical notion to comparative studies of religions’ resurgence around the world. Moreover, the very term “desecularization” has been used rarely and mostly without clarification of its meaning, as if the concept was self-explanatory. Existing literature shows no attempts to define desecularization analytically, which would include specifying its component processes, levels, actors, social forces, patterns, and trajectories. The absence of such a general conceptual framework impedes large-scale comparisons of desecularization’s known cases. This, in turn, prevents theoretical generalization and the development of a theory of desecularization.

This contrasts sharply with existing prolific work dedicated to defining, conceptualizing, and theorizing secularization (understood as a general decline of religion’s societal influence). Debates and disagreements notwithstanding, secularization studies have developed into a relatively coherent field that enables theoretical generalization and hypotheses testing. Thus, the sociology of religion today still appears much better equipped to study the secularizing trends and forces than the desecularizing ones. Consequently, the important goal of systematically exploring the forces and trends’ interplay remains elusive.

Why this has been so is a question that merits investigation, yet is too big for a journal article. I will limit its discussion to suggesting that the relative underdevelopment of desecularization theory reflects a certain “cultural lag.” The intellectual culture of


5. The concept was originally introduced to denote nonmaterial culture’s lagging reflection of changes in material environment (William F. Ogburn, “Cultural Lag as Theory,” *Sociology and Social Research* 41, no. 3 [1957]: 167–74). I apply it in a more general sense, meaning that the culturally shaped ideations
sociology has been slow to reflect drastic changes in the world’s religious scene. Debates still largely revolve around an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agenda originally set to herald religion’s decline in the West. This applies to critics of the secularization thesis no less than to its proponents. After all, both still focus on if, where, and why religion and/or its societal role are in decline. It is still about proving Comte right or wrong. Meanwhile, the rise of Christianity in the “global South,” the worldwide Islamic resurgence, the revitalization of religion in Russia and China, and other cases of desecularization have become common knowledge. Yet, sociologists are immersed in rearguard theoretical skirmishes and are inadequately prepared for conceptualizing and theoretically explaining these new realities on the ground. Existing literature sheds light on the origins of the “cultural lag.” According to Stark, the sociological canon was largely shaped by classical atheist proponents of the idea of secularization.6 The canon’s lasting effect is reinforced by what Stark calls “ancestor worship,” i.e., “uncritical reception of the classics’ ideas.” Phillip Rieff put it more bluntly: “sociology as we know it began as a deathwork against European Catholic social order. The deathwork is enacted everyday in the halls of our institutions of higher illiteracy.”8 Furthermore, as Berger suggests, “academics” prevalent secularism and detachment from the religious masses lead to a widespread view of any non-moribund religiosity as “fundamentalism,” which impedes objective analyses of religious resurgence. As a result, sociology that often boastfully presents itself as critical thinking incarnate and as a reflexive force behind social change fails on both counts. Whatever its causes, as long as this situation persists, sociology will become increasingly irrelevant to understanding and predicting the ongoing changes in religions’ societal roles.

This essay is written in an attempt to contribute to overcoming the aforesaid lag. It introduces a conceptual framework for desecularization analysis based on contemporary and classical concepts of we use to make sense of the world around us are inert and fail to reflect rapidly occurring social changes.

the sociology of religion. Thus, it builds on the work of Peter Berger and incorporates the ideas of Daniel Bell, Jose Casanova, Grace Davie, Emile Durkheim, Philip Rieff, Pitirim Sorokin, Christian Smith, Rodney Stark, Charles Taylor, and other theorists. While these scholars represent divergent and at times rivaling theoretical orientations, the essay shows that their ideas shed light, albeit from different angles, on the nature and meaning of desecularization.

The essay begins by developing an analytical definition of desecularization as counter-secularization. The definition specifies desecularization’s constituent processes that include changes in collective representations and institutions (both formal and informal) and ultimately transform societies’ material substrata. It further discusses desecularization’s unintegratedness and links it to the underlying dynamics of sociocultural systemic transitions. Next, the analysis focuses on the actors and activists of desecularization. This leads me to specify patterns of desecularization “from below” and “from above” depending on what actors play a leading role in counter-secularization. Subsequently, I introduce the concept and typology of “desecularizing regimes” reflecting the societal reach, institutional arrangements, ideologies, and degrees of pluralism and coercion involved in counter-secularization. A typology of mass reactions to desecularizing regimes is offered in this context. Next, I consider analytical levels and time-scales involved in desecularization analyses. I further suggest that the time-scales we apply to desecularization studies are consequential for understanding its social forces and foundations. In particular, a “mega-historical” perspective may help us focus on the underlying cultural dynamics of secularization and desecularization and revise habitual ideas concerning their interplay with modernity. Finally, I introduce the notion of multiple, overlapping, and clashing desecularizations and briefly address globalization’s role in their development.

Desecularization as Counter-secularization: Toward a Definition

The Point of Departure

Although Peter Berger’s seminal essay,¹⁰ does not contain a fully developed definition of desecularization, it provides crucially important leads to constructing such a definition. In particular, pivotal to the discussion that follows is Berger’s notion of desecularization as counter-secularization. The latter is “at least as

important a phenomenon in the contemporary world as seculariza-

11. Moreover, counter-secularization reflects the presence of

12. Berger envisions desecularization as the resurgence

13. Berger also considers desecularization as a response to the uncertainties of


15. Finke and Stark do consider a secularization-revival cycle as an engine of
growth within specific churches and sects, but not at a national level. I return
to their cyclical model below.

16. Forms of such a survival and adaptation to secular conditions are famously
captured by Grace Davie’s concepts of “believing without belonging” and “vicar-
ious religion” (Grace Davie, Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates

What Desecularization Is and Is Not

Berger’s ideas help us distinguish between desecularization proper
and a much broader class of phenomena pertaining to religions’
growth and expanding influence on societies. Evident as it may
seem, the distinction is still important to note if we are to arrive
at a logically stricter definition of desecularization. In terms of
the Aristotelian logic of definition, the presence of secularization
is the specific difference (differentia specifica) that sets deseculari-

11. Ibid., 6.

12. Ibid., 7.

13. Berger also considers desecularization as a response to the uncertainties of
modernity. This idea, however, belongs to the discussion of the social founda-
tions of desecularization, which will be addressed later in this paper.


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secularized settings, such as Western European societies. Religions’ survival under secular regimes may translate into their subsequent resurgence. It is also a demonstration that even in emblematically modern Western settings secularization’s effects on society are limited. Yet, survival and adaptation are clearly different from resurgence and cannot be considered under the conceptual rubric of desecularization. I would not have addressed this obvious distinction had it not been somewhat blurred in recent discussions. Even Peter Berger’s original collection *The Desecularization of the World* discusses religions’ resilience alongside major cases of their resurgence.  

There is a reason why religions’ resilience under secular regimes is at times discussed side by side with counter-secular resurgences. Both classes of phenomena manifest the limits of secularization and logically come up together when the shortcomings of religious decline theories are discussed. Yet, theorizing desecularization does not involve an all-out refutation of the secularization thesis. Moreover, as was stated above, congruent with Berger’s original idea, a valid conceptualization of desecularization as counter-secularization rests upon acknowledging the presence of secularizing trends and forces. Only in such a manner will we be able to approach the important task of studying the interplay between secularizing and counter-secularizing trends. Therefore, the development of a theory of desecularization will, in my view, benefit once this issue is detached more clearly from the never-ending debate on whether or not and to what extent secularization is a reality. Some proponents and opponents of the secularization thesis may see the debate as a zero-sum game. Yet, desecularization and secularization studies are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they tell mutually complementary stories of the complex relationships between religion and society; that is, to the extent that both theories are...
understood as scientific accounts rather than conflicting normatively prescriptive models of modern society.  

**Desecularization as Social Change**

Peter Berger’s original desecularization thesis 20 focused more on the nature and social origins of resurgent religions than on their societal impact. The emphasis was justified against the background of previous studies that had often ignored counter-secularizing movements or construed them as “fundamentalist” aberrations in the course of the presumably irreversible secularization. This essay, however, stresses another, no less important, aspect of desecularization that the original thesis has, to an extent, bypassed. It approaches desecularization as a process of social change associated with religions’ resurgence and their expanding societal influences. Such a perspective is consistent with the interpretation of desecularization as counter-secularization. Secularization is generally considered as a multi-faceted social transformation in the course of which religion’s influences on society decline. It is logical, therefore, to consider counter-secularization as a process of social change that develops in the opposite direction. Such an approach allows us to specify the component processes of the desecularizing social change.

**Desecularization’s Component Processes**

If desecularization is a counter-secularizing social change, then, logically, its component processes can be defined as opposites of the constituent tendencies of secularization. Thus, we can build on existing conceptualizations of secularization to specify social transformations potentially involved in counter-secularization.

Existing conceptualizations reflect an evolving notion of secularization. Initial formulas expressed a bold view of an overall general decline (or even extinction) of religion in modern society. However, reformulations of the last three decades have offered an increasingly complex, nuanced, and multifaceted vision. 21 These evolving

19. I use terms from Casanova who notes that “theories of secularization double as empirically descriptive theories of modern social processes and as normatively prescriptive theories of modern societies, and thus serve to legitimate ideologically a particular historical form of institutionalization of modernity.” See Casanova, *Public Religions in Modern World*, 41.


conceptualizations attempt to adapt secularization theory not only to the mounting evidence of religious vitality in modern times, but also to pointed and harsh criticisms by the theory’s opponents. Recent reformulations portray secularization as a multifaceted process that involves potentially inconsistent and dissimilarly paced transformations in various societal domains and at various levels of social organization, from individual-level beliefs to societal institutions and structures. Accommodating evidence of religions’ resilience at some of these levels, the reformulations allow for disjunctions and contradictions within the overall secularizing process. As a result, secularization increasingly looks like a combination of relatively autonomous, loosely (if at all) interrelated trends in various societal domains.22

A First Approximation

Recent clear articulations of the relatively autonomous elements of the secularization process make it possible to equally distinctly specify the potential component processes of counter-secularization. As a first approximation, let us build on Casanova’s influential view of secularization as inclusive of three unintegrated (emphasis added) processes: differentiation of societal institutions from religious norms, decline of religious beliefs and practices, and privatization of religion (i.e., its marginalization from the public sphere).23 Accordingly, desecularization can be symmetrically conceptualized as including three counter-secularizing processes. Thus, desecularization includes (a) a rapprochement between


22. This is most clearly reflected in the influential conceptualizations of secularization by Bryan R. Wilson, Religion in Sociological Perspective (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 149; Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World, 211; and Steve Bruce, God Is Dead: Secularization in the West (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 3.

23. Casanova, ibid.
formerly secularized institutions and religious norms; (b) a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices, and (c) a return of religion to the public sphere. An important consideration is that the counter-secularizing processes may be weakly or not at all integrated, just as are the aforesaid secularizing trends. For instance, a resurgence of religious beliefs may or may not translate into a greater role of religion in public institutions. Or, conversely, a greater public role of religion does not necessarily imply a growing popular religiosity. The component processes of desecularization can develop incongruently and be differently paced. Theoretically, secularizing trends in one sphere (e.g., individual-level religious commitments) can even coexist with desecularizing tendencies in other domains (e.g., public institutions). However, the issue of integration and non-integration among counter-secularizing trends is in fact more complex and will be addressed in greater detail later.

Missing Components: Toward a Fuller Definition

Insightful and succinct as it is, Casanova’s conceptualization bypasses important components of secularization, some of which were more prominently included in earlier theories. As a result, the definition of counter-secularization and its components that I proposed above is also incomplete. The discussion below leads to a more complete view.

Culture. A yawning hole in our first approximation deals with secularizing and desecularizing trends in culture. The culture aspect is missing from Casanova’s definition (although not from his work) yet is strongly emphasized in Berger’s classical formulation:

[S]ecularization…affects the totality of cultural life and of ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature, and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective of the world.24

Accordingly, I define counter-secularizing trends in culture as manifesting themselves in a revival of religious content in a variety of its symbolic subsystems, including the arts, philosophy, and literature, and in a decline of the standing of science relative to a resurgent role of religion in world-construction and world-maintenance.25 Some clarifications are due here. First, as with

25. I use the terms “world-construction” and “world-maintenance” in the sense they are defined by Berger, ibid., 3–51.
the overall process of desecularization, counter-secularizing trends in culture may be inconsistent and affect some of its subsystems more than others. Secondly, a counter-secularization of some cultural domains may, theoretically, co-occur with a continuing secularization of others. Thirdly, note that the proposed definition includes a relative (in comparison with religion) decline of the standing of science. The science component of culture can grow in absolute terms and yet play a lesser role as a frame of reference in world-maintenance. For instance, inclusion of creationist views in biology textbooks diminishes the monopoly of science as a decidedly secular cultural tool of world-construction, but it does not mean a decline of biological science as such.

Finally, the proposed formulation involves a specific interpretation of culture. To use Lamont and Wuthnow’s terms, it builds on a “European” rather than “American” tradition of culture studies. The former tends to view culture as comprising supra-individual symbolic systems and steers clear of methodological individualism in its analysis. The latter more typically approaches cultures as aggregates of beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms shared by society’s members and attributable to the individuals’ locations in society. Berger’s view, cited above, is rooted in the “European” tradition, since he clearly distinguishes cultural secularization from that of the individual-level subjective consciousness. Similarly, the proposed view of cultural counter-secularization analytically separates resurgent religious trends in supra-individual symbolic systems from growing religiosity of individual-level beliefs. The emphasis here is on Durkheim’s “collective representations” crystallized into lasting symbolic systems (e.g., mythologies, theologies, and ideologies) that shape individual-level beliefs yet are irreducible to them.

This aspect of culture has received scant attention in recent studies of secularizing and desecularizing trends. Recent empirical studies of large-scale “culture shifts” mostly rely on survey research. Thus, the shifts they report are aggregate trends in individual-level subjective consciousness and self-reported behavior. Such studies are indispensable for tracking declines and

resurgences in mass beliefs and practices, yet they are poor substitutes for assessing trends in culture’s religious content.  

While survey-based assessments of religious trends have proliferated in recent decades, large-scale content-analytical studies of the arts, literature, philosophy, and other cultural subsystems have been marginal if not altogether forsaken by social scientists. Recent scholarship has not produced or attempted anything close to Sorokin’s massive study of trends in the “ideational” (in essence, religious) and “sensate” elements in the content of art, philosophy, and other cultural forms that spanned approximately 2,500 years of history of Western civilization.

In the absence of long-term content-analytical studies of culture (including its contemporary audio-visual and digital manifestations), research on current secularizing and counter-secularizing trends produces an incomplete and potentially distorted portrayal of religion’s status in modern society. For instance, if we were to predict the trajectory of secularization in France based on individual-level measures of eighteenth-century religiosity while completely disregarding the content of the Enlightenment literature, our prediction would most likely be erroneous. Similarly, the actual and potential influence of radical Islamism may appear very small if we solely use survey data on Muslims’ opinions to measure it. Yet, a different assessment of radical Islamism’s

29. A case in point is Norris and Inglehart’s global study of religion and social and political attitudes. See Pippa Norris and Inglehart Ronald, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). This informative study provides wealth of data on trends in individual-level religiosity, values and attitudes across nations and civilizations. Yet, it offers an essentially reductionist view of culture when, for instance, it relies on the individual-level variables to measure similarities and differences between Western and Islamic civilizations (ibid., 133–55). The problem is that civilizations are cultural formations defined by religious traditions and comprised of supra-individual elements (institutions, customs, mythologies, etc.) irreducible to individuals’ value orientations.

30. A rare exception in sociology can be found in Philip Rieff, My Life among the Deathworks. Rieff’s insightful analyses of the meanings of specific works of modern art as “deathworks,” i.e., de-creations (or resolutions) of the symbolism of sacred orders is directly relevant for understanding secularizing influences on culture. However, Rieff’s study focuses on a small number of selected works of arts and cannot be used to account for long-term trends.


32. That is what Esposito and Mogahed do when, based on Gallup polls, they report that only 7 percent of the world’s Muslims consider the attacks of September 11 “completely” justified, and thus, only a small minority of
influence could result from a study of religio-political ideas prevalent in school textbooks, state-controlled TV broadcasts, and numerous radical Internet sites.

Furthermore, the predominant reliance on the “American” tradition of culture studies prevents incorporation of potentially important theoretical insights concerning the culture of late modernity into empirical research on desecularization. The insights deal with immanent limits and dead ends of secularized culture, the resilience of religious components, and the potential for a cultural desecularization. In particular, thirty-four years ago, Daniel Bell predicted a forthcoming religious answer to the “profanation” of culture (i.e., to its secularization expressed in the elimination of culture’s sacred element). Secularized culture’s overwhelming emphasis on unlimited self-expression, on the transgression of once sacred boundaries, and on “release” at the expense of constraint and incorporation, produces a powerful tendency toward nihilism, which ultimately renders human existence meaningless and coexistence impossible. The forthcoming religious answer, Bell says, reflects a cultural pattern of “constant returning,” which reestablishes the sacred. This provides people with answers to the ultimate questions of their existence. Bell’s argument is congruent with Rieff’s. In his view, the essence of modern secular culture (in his terms, the “third,” or the “third world” culture) is in “de-creation,” or in resolution of sacred orders of the “second” (theistic) culture. However, the latter is repressed by the secularizing onslaught but never eliminated, since transgressions and de-creations (“deathworks”) inevitably reference that which is de-created. Hence Rieff’s method of de-creation of the third-world culture’s de-creating works (e.g., in the arts), which reveals the

Muslims is politically radicalized. See John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 97. Moreover, the authors do a poor job even with their survey data. The accuracy of this estimate is impossible to assess since no full distribution of answers to the radicalism question is provided (for instance, it remains unknown what proportion of Muslims consider attacks “partly” justified). Nor does the book provide a breakdown of answers by country, creating a potentially wrong impression that radicalism levels do not differ cross-nationally. An interesting comparison comes to mind. A 1945 survey found that no Germans at all (0 percent) said Hitler was right in his treatment of the Jews, 19 percent thought he went too far, and 77 percent opined that Hitler’s actions were in no way justified. See Sarah Ann Gordon, *Hitler, Germans, and the “Jewish question”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 198. Based on this post-factum conducted survey, the Holocaust becomes a fully incomprehensible event.

underlying, repressed sacred meanings. The resilience of sacred orders sets limits to cultural modernity, and the entire field of culture becomes a battlefield between, in Berger’s terms, secularizing and counter-secularizing forces.34 “The kulturkampf between second world sacred orders and third world anti-sacred social orders is now worldwide,” Rieff says.35 He also suggested that we may be near the end of the period of modernist inversions of sacred order.36

These ideas open up the possibility of looking at secularization and desecularization as trends reflecting a broader pattern cultural dynamics, which oscillates between the predominantly religious and secular poles, or, to use Sorokin’s terms, between the “idea-tional” and “sensate” systems. This theoretical turn will be discussed below. At this point, let us note that the heuristic potential of Bell, Berger, and Rieff’s ideas pertaining to the resilience and resurgence of the transcendental content of culture’s symbolic systems remain underutilized in the mainstream of empirical research on secularization and desecularization. As a result, our empirical knowledge of relevant cultural trends remains incomplete and unreliable.

Substratum. There is yet another frequently overlooked side of secularizing and counter-secularizing social changes. It deals with declining and resurging religious influences on society’s material substratum. If we applied Durkheim’s typology of social phenomena37 to existing work on secularization and counter-secularization, it would show that most discussions of secularization and counter-secularization focus on all of his types of social facts except for the material substratum. Indeed, these discussions involve (moving from least to most crystallized social facts): (a) effervescent, emerging currents in collective representations and related behaviors (e.g., changes in religious beliefs and practices); (b) crystallized collective representations (such as culture’s symbolic systems of theology, ideologies, mythologies, science, etc.); and (c) institutional (normative) sphere, where we observe separation and/or reunification of sacred meanings. The resilience of sacred orders sets limits to cultural modernity, and the entire field of culture becomes a battlefield between, in Berger’s terms, secularizing and counter-secularizing forces.34 “The kulturkampf between second world sacred orders and third world anti-sacred social orders is now worldwide,” Rieff says.35 He also suggested that we may be near the end of the period of modernist inversions of sacred order.36

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secular and religious norms and establishments. Glaringly missing remains what Durkheim called substratum, the most crystallized and tangible type of social facts. By the virtue of its rigidity, substratum exerts powerful constraints on people’s behavior and perceptions, yet at the same time it can be seen as the ultimate crystallization and materialization of collective representations and institutions. Substrata comprise elements that are “anatomical” or “morphological” to societies: population size, distribution and territorial organization, material objects such as buildings and communications, and others. Given a materialistic penchant of much of modern sociology, it is somewhat surprising how rarely analyses of religion’s changing societal role have focused on such material indicators. (Ironically, the origins of the term “secularization” include a very material concern with confiscation of church properties by the state.)

Consider substratum’s demographic aspects, such as changes in fertility and population size. Demographers take religion's impact on birth rates and population growth seriously. However, demographic dimensions remain largely peripheral to conceptualizations and measurements of secularization and counter-secularization. There is, furthermore, a tendency to treat both high religiosity and high fertility rates as consequences of low levels of socioeconomic development. For instance, Norris and Inglehart suggest that higher human development (and therefore, human security) leads to cultural changes reducing religiosity and fertility. Because less developed societies retain higher birth rates, the world does not become less religious despite secularization in more developed nations (note that, phrased differently, the same argument reads as one of a desecularization of the world manifesting itself in the growth of its religious population). In this logic, religiosity is but a connecting, mediating variable between socioeconomic security and fertility. This is a materialistic argument: economic growth diminishes religiousness and consequently reduces fertility.

Yet, there is massive evidence that, among groups in comparable socioeconomic conditions, those with higher religiosity and/or

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41. Norris and Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide, 6, 62–79.
more conservatively religious have considerably higher birth rates. For instance, Hout states that the American baby boom was concentrated among Catholic, evangelical, and fundamentalist women, while “mainline Protestant denominations contributed what amounted to a baby blip.” More recent U.S. data show that, controlling for race, ethnicity, income, and education, religious beliefs have substantial positive effect on both female and male fertility. Similarly, conservative religiosity strongly predicts teen birth rates in America independently of economic wealth. Western European nations have human development levels (and thus, human security levels) similar to those of the United States. However, socio-economic conditions held equal, if women in Western Europe had religiosity levels equal to their American counterparts, their birth rates would be 19 percent higher, and in France, 35 percent higher than what they presently are. In Islamic countries, higher individual-level Muslim religiosity and support for Shari’a Law are linked to higher fertility, which may translate into growth of Islamist populations. These patterns appear to be anything but new; as Stark explains, Christianity’s rise in the Roman Empire is partly attributable to higher fertility and lower mortality rates in Christian communities compared with pagans.

Thus, the religion–fertility–population growth nexus recurs across nations, (at least some) civilizations and historical epochs. High fertility and resulting population growth can be seen as attributes rather than occasional concomitants of strong

religions and pieties. Accordingly, rising birth rates and the resulting growth of religious communities can be seen as indicators of religions’ resurging strength, and thus, of desecularization. This view becomes even more plausible if we abandon an “external” causal interpretation of the religion–fertility link (religion “causes” fertility as something external to it). Strong religions usually attempt to shape their adherents’ entire ways of life, especially their fundamental aspects, such as family relations. Giving birth to, and raising, many children can thus be seen as religious practice (at least in conservative groups of the Abrahamic traditions), as something that is intrinsic, not extrinsic to religion, intrinsic no less than prayer and participation in rituals.

Another frequently overlooked substratum-related aspect of secularization and counter-secularization deals with the territoriality of religions and with religious definitions of territories and their populations. Berger, Davie, and Fokas highlight this aspect in their discussion of religions’ resilience in European countries. Europe’s historic churches, they say, are territorially embedded. Their continued presence is reflected in spatial organization, urban planning, and architectural styles. Church buildings dominate skylines and serve as important physical frames of reference.49 Perhaps one could also say that just as religions are territorially embedded, territories and their populations are embedded in symbolic spaces defined by the presence of religious objects. Accordingly, changing numbers and prominence of religion-related material objects can be seen as symptoms of declines or increases in the importance of religions for the social organization of territories and populations. The expropriation of church lands in eighteenth-century France and massive demolition of churches under the Soviet rule were clear signs of secularization. Restitution of church properties, large-scale restoration of old, and the building of new churches in post-Soviet Russia are symptoms of desecularization. Consider, for instance, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of the cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The gigantic cathedral was designed in the 1830s and consecrated in 1883. In 1931, it was demolished, and in the 1960s, an outdoor pool was opened on its site. During the 1990s, the cathedral was rebuilt from scratch, then consecrated in the year 2000 and presently dominates, once again, much of the downtown Moscow skyline. This story is emblematic of the secularization and counter-secularization of Russia. Similarly, construction of huge mosques in England, Italy, and

other European countries is indicative of Islamic growth on the continent.

Many other changes in society’s substrata can be construed as indicators of desecularization. Traffic patterns on Sundays and religious holidays are reflective of emerging patterns of mass religious behavior. Very importantly, the volumes and overall value of religion-related goods and services provided by national and local markets are tangible indicators of the changing strength of religion’s economic impact. Such indicators may be more objective than volatile opinions captured by social surveys, but they are yet to occupy a more prominent place in the studies of desecularization.

Desecularization as an Unintegrated Process: In What Sense and Why?

As was mentioned above, since secularization is an unintegrated process, the counter-process of desecularization can be similarly unintegrated, meaning that counter-secularization’s component changes may develop incongruently, be differently paced, and coexist with secularizing trends. This thesis builds on Casanova’s view of secularization.50 Let us note, however, that Casanova’s definition is more of a generalized empirical observation than a theoretically derived concept. It does not explain the concept of unintegratedness of secularization’s (and, consequently, of counter-secularization’s) component processes, nor does it lay out theoretical grounds for deeming the processes unintegrated. The paragraphs below suggest that Sorokin’s theory of cultural dynamics can help us overcome these limitations.

According to Sorokin,51 sociocultural systems cyclically oscillate between the “ideational” and “sensate” poles. At the center of ideational systems are beliefs in supernatural truths; they emphasize transcendental knowledge and spiritual and religious value orientations. Sensate cultures center on empirically and rationally established truths and forms of knowledge, and are essentially secular and materialistic in their value-orientations and chief pursuits. Yet the sociocultural systems are never perfectly integrated. A fully religious or a fully secular society is at best an “ideal type” or, at worst, pure fiction. Ideational systems have sensate enclaves and vice versa. In addition, there are transitional systems, such as “idealist” ones that combine foundational

51. Sorokin, Social and Cultural Dynamics.
principles of both the ideational and sensate cultures. Thus, Sorokin's theory postulates a degree of unintegratedness in any sociocultural system.

The unintegratedness can logically be expected to increase in the process of cyclical transition from ideational to sensate phases and back. This gives us an important clue for understanding the unintegratedness of both secularization and desecularization. Both types of social change are in essence transitions from predominantly (but never fully) religious sociocultural systems to predominantly secular ones, or, in the case of counter-secularization, in the opposite direction. Thus, the incongruence and contradictions among counter-secularizing trends, their varying paces, and potential co-occurrence with secularizing changes reflect the transitional nature of the desecularization process.

Furthermore, Sorokin's ideas clarify in what sense secularization and counter-secularization processes are unintegrated. He discusses various types of relationships among elements and processes coexisting and co-occurring in societies. The simplest of them are “congeries,” incoherent mixes of heterogeneous components that are neither causally nor functionally related to each other. Another type relevant for this discussion is “causal or functional integration,” where phenomena are functionally interrelated and/or causal links among them exist. A third type is “logico-meaningful integration” where elements are logically unified by common cultural principles and ideas.

From this point of view, the ideal types of “ideational” and “sensate” sociocultural systems are held together primarily by logico-meaningful integration, while transitional, secularizing or desecularizing systems will be only weakly, if at all, integrated. Indeed, coexistence of counter-secularizing trends with persistent or growing secularity in some societal units can be seen as a “congerie” inclusive of logico-meaningfully incompatible elements. At the same time, when the component trends of counter-secularization reflect a resurgent influence of one religion, they may exhibit a higher level of meaningful integration. However, a more pluralistic counter-secularization (that involves several simultaneously resurgent faiths) will also result in a congerie rather than a meaningful integration.

Possible functional interdependencies between secularizing and counter-secularizing trends also need to be considered. For instance, persistence and/or resurgence of state-sponsored public religions may provide functional support for such forms

52. Ibid., 2–19.
of mass religiosity as “believing without belonging”\(^{53}\) (a combination of resilient individual belief with declining belonging to religious communities) and “vicarious religion”\(^{54}\) (in which religious church leaders, hierarchies, and small number of churchgoers are perceived as performing religious functions on behalf of the larger society). Taxpayer supported religious education in some European state school systems is functional for sustaining churches that are attended so poorly that mass catechization becomes impossible. A resurgent sense of Christian identity in some European populations may be a latent function of a growing Muslim presence, and so on. Thus, what on the surface appears as a lack of integration may in reality reveal complex latent interdependencies.

A working definition of desecularization is offered below. It incorporates the components omitted in our “first-approximation” definition. It also reflects preceding discussion on the issue of the integration of desecularization’s components. Thus, desecularization can be defined as follows.

**Desecularization** is a process of counter-secularization, through which religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous and/or co-occurring secularizing processes. The process manifests itself as a combination of some or all of the following tendencies: (a) a rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms, both formal and informal; (b) a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices; (c) a return of religion to the public sphere (“de-privatization”); (d) a revival of religious content in a variety of culture’s subsystems, including the arts, philosophy, and literature, and in a decline of the standing of science relative to a resurgent role of religion in world-construction and world-maintenance; (e) religion-related changes in society’s substratum (including religiously inspired demographic changes, redefinition of territories and their populations along religious lines, reappearance of faith-related material structures, growing shares of religion-related goods in the overall economic market, and so on). The aforesaid tendencies can be, to a different degree, functionally interdependent and logico-meaningfully integrated by a shared religious source (or lack meaningful integration if a simultaneous resurgence of multiple religions is taking place). Counter-secularizing trends can also co-occur with persistent or deepening secularization in some societal domains and, furthermore, be latently interdependent with them.


\(^{54}\) Forms of vicarious religion are discussed in Berger et al., *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*, 40.
Actors, Patterns, and Regimes of Desecularization

Counter-Secularizing Actors and Activists

One cannot presume that changes in religion’s societal status and roles automatically follow social–structural transformations, such as modernization. This is an important lesson that students of desecularization can learn from secularization studies. The presumption that modernization induces, as if by itself, a diminishment of religion’s societal role has dominated secularization research for a long time, and its impact is still noticeable. Yet, recent theoretical and empirical research has criticized this structuralist assumption and emphasized the role of human agency, of social actors whose concrete works change religion’s status in various societal domains.

This theme is clearly articulated in Berger, Davie, and Fokas’s contextualized comparison of religious change in Europe and America that emphasizes intellectual elites’ orientations, differences in Enlightenment ideology versions, and other factors pertinent to the role of agency in secularization. As Chaves put it, “secularization occurs, or not, as the result of social and political conflicts between those social actors who would enhance or maintain religion’s social significance and those who would reduce it. The social significance of the religious sphere at a given time and place is the outcome of previous conflicts of this nature.” Christian Smith develops this line of research both theoretically and empirically. Building on ideas of the sociology of revolutions and social movements, Smith theorizes factors typically neglected in secularization research. These include the “issues of agency, interests, mobilization, alliances, resources, organizations, power, and strategy in social transformations.” Religion’s marginalization in public institutions, he states, was historically accomplished by specific groups of “secularizing activists”—actors who had

55. For instance, this view is expressed in Norris and Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide. A recent refinement of secularization theory by Bruce (God Is Dead: Secularization in the West) retains this premise, although in a softened, less deterministic manner.
specific interests, grievances, and cultural and ideological orientations leading them to engage in secularizing efforts.60

To avoid repeating mistakes of earlier secularization theorists, students of desecularization need to embrace the agency-focused perspective. This involves a view of counter-secularization as the work of “desecularizing activists,” and, more broadly, specific social actors with specific interests, ideologies, and levels of access to resources. Unlike Smith who, to a degree, equates activists with actors, I propose to distinguish between them. Desecularizing activists are individuals and groups immediately and actively involved in efforts to reestablish religion’s role in societal institutions and culture. Actors of desecularization is a broader notion. It denotes larger groups whose interests, grievances, and cultural and ideological orientations are congruent with activists’, but who provide a more passive backing to counter-secularizing efforts, not participating in them actively, but rather serving as a social and political support base of counter-secularizing activities’. For instance, only small activist groups usually participate in efforts to keep or bring back displays of the Ten Commandments in American courthouses. Yet these activists can rely on a broader support base of conservative Christian groups who, in this case, can be seen as actors of desecularization.

Religious Masses, Secular Elites?

Who the actual counter-secularizing activists and actors are will depend on the specific religious, cultural, and socio-political contexts in which desecularization takes place. However, in broader, conceptual terms, this question remains underexplored. Berger’s desecularization thesis suggests that counter-secularization movements express mass discontent with secular elites and elite ideology of secularism.61 An implicit image here is of religious masses revolting against irreligious or anti-religious elites. Indeed, religious masses can be seen as actors of counter-secularization, especially when a mass mobilization against relatively secular elites takes place. Secularist political and ideological regimes marginalize religious masses that may be a majority of the population under the regimes’ control. The regimes, in Rieff’s words, “transform second world moral majorities into third world fundamentalist minorities.”62 Politico-ideological disenfranchisement of religious

60. Ibid., 32–33.
62. Rieff, My Life among the Deathworks, 6. As was explained earlier, Rieff’s “second world” stands for theistic cultures’ sacred orders, while “third world” is the social order devoid of the sacred element.
majorities is a potential source of counter-secularizing mass movements.

Yet, mass movements typically have vanguards (in our case, counter-secularizing activist groups) and intellectuals articulating people’s grievances and desires in the form of coherent ideologies and political programs. The intellectuals can be “organic” to popular movements, or function as their outside allies. Thus, conflicts between secularizing and counter-secularizing forces will manifest themselves in clashes between activist groups and intellectuals spearheading these forces. Accordingly, the “religious masses, secular elites” model is only part of the story of counter-secularizing movements. Another part, sociologically no less important, is the struggle between, in Rieff’s terms, “officer classes” leading secularizing and counter-secularizing forces.

The emergence and formation of counter-secularizing intellectual vanguards is another intriguing but understudied issue. Berger remarks that “in the best tradition of Karl Marx, a relatively small group of American intellectuals have become ‘traitors to their class’ and joined the adversary camp.”63 The witty reference to Marx leaves it unclear, however, what compels parts of educated elites to “switch sides” in the battle. This question deserves serious investigation because our answers to it can provide keys to predicting potential transformations of the intellectual culture of secularized societies. It would be important to understand, for example, if, and to what extent, intellectuals’ “betrayal” of the secular cause reflects their understanding of limitations and existential pitfalls of secularism. Yet another hypothetical explanation deals with the understanding of “betrayal” as an innovative behavior. Indeed, in a thoroughly secularized society loyalty to secularism is, in essence, conformism. By contrast, embracing a religious cause is innovative and nonconformist. Innovators tend to be more privileged and educated, which, in Stark’s view, in part explains why Christianity as a new religious movement was initially embraced by aspiring, well-to-do urbanites.64 From this perspective, it is not so puzzling that segments of intellectual elites return to religious traditions previously marginalized by secular regimes. An ancient tradition that has been long suppressed can have a “new religion” appeal to those who were socialized in secularized settings. This may partly explain the fact that the ongoing resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church was preceded and in part prepared by a remarkable return of large numbers of the Soviet intelligentsia to

Orthodoxy, including some of the best-educated, most gifted people in the land.\textsuperscript{65}

Another largely overlooked aspect of the masses-elites model deals with active roles that secular elites, including governmental and other political leaders can and, in some cases, do play in desecularization. Telling in this regard are crucial roles that Russia’s post-communist and Chinese communist governments have played. Surely, secular political elites are not part of counter-secularizing movements. However, for reasons of political expediency, they can provide the movements with greater opportunities and resources for success. In particular, secular political elites in the Russian case have played a crucial role in partial desecularization of public institutions, such as state schools, prisons, and armed forces.\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{Desecularization from below and from above}

Depending on the social actors involved, the desecularization of social institutions and culture, and the de-privatization of religion can be seen as initiated and carried out \textit{“from below”} and/or \textit{“from above.”} When the activists and actors involved are grassroots-level movements and groups representing the masses of religious adherents, we are dealing with a desecularization \textit{“from below.”} When the activists and actors largely include religious and secular leadership, a desecularization \textit{“from above”} is taking place. The two models are ideal types capturing prevailing patterns of counter-secularization. Empirical cases can be expected to fall somewhere in between and include variable combinations of trends developing in both directions.

The processes developing from below and from above will be as incongruent or congruent as are interests, ideological and cultural orientations of, and resources available to the actors involved. For instance, a revival of popular religiosity may not lead to the desecularization of public institutions because grassroots-level movements are weak and lack resources while elites are eager to preserve a secular status quo. Or, on the contrary, well organized and resourceful elites can desecularize public institutions even in the absence of a noticeable religious revival from below.

\textsuperscript{65} Jane Ellis, \textit{The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History} (London and New York: Routledge, 1986), 287.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{67} Elena Lisovskaya and Vyacheslav Karpov, “Orthodoxy, Islam, and Desecularization of Russia’s State Schools.”
Prerequisites for a Desecularization from below

Theoretically, formerly secularized institutions can be desecularized by popular demand, i.e., from below. This, however, would presume a high level of mass involvement in the attempts to bring religion back into the institutions, which, in turn, would be possible if the following three conditions existed. First, a broad grassroots movement to desecularize public institutions (e.g., schools) is possible when and where there is a high level of religious adherence; after all, it is hard to expect a nonreligious populace to insist on bringing religion back into the school. Secondly, such a movement would involve organized efforts, and thus the emergence of voluntary associations promoting the agenda of desecularization. Third, the emerging religious movement would need considerable resources to achieve its goals. The resources would need to include both the material means and political leverage. The latter includes the opportunities to exert political influence provided by the structure of governance, representative institutions, democratic procedures, and so on. Absent these three conditions, masses of ordinary believers can play, at most, a passive role in desecularization by consenting to elites’ efforts to magnify religion’s role in society.

Desecularizing Regimes

Once counter-secularizing activists and actors acquire a certain level of influence on society or on a subset of its institutions, once they occupy, to use a Leninist term, “commanding heights,” the emergence and consolidation of a specific “desecularizing regime” takes place. By this I mean a particular normative and politico-ideological mode in which desecularization is carried out, expanded, and sustained. It includes: (a) the scope of intended desecularization, ranging from only some institutions and cultural domains to a total religious transformation of society; (b) institutional arrangements (both formal and informal) allocating given amounts of power and authority to religious and secular actors and defining the limits of religious and civil liberties for religious and secular groups in the population; (c) a specific mode of enforcement of these arrangements; and (d) ideologies legitimating the arrangements.

This multifaceted definition can be used to develop a framework for comparative cross-cultural and historical studies of desecularizing regimes that could focus on diverse cases ranging from post-revolutionary France to post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe, and from revolutionary Iran and the Taliban-era
Afghanistan to contemporary Indonesia and China. Desecularizing regimes will vary greatly along these dimensions. Some, aiming at a total desecularization of society, will claim authority to control the totality of public and private institutions, as did, for instance, the Taliban rulers. Others will have a limited reach, trying to modify some, but not other, public institutions while leaving the private sphere alone (as it happened in Romania, Bulgaria, and Russia). Depending on the relative amounts of power in decision-making given to secular and religious actors, some regimes put secular states at the center and in control of the development and maintenance of counter-secularizing processes (as is the case in China), and yet others will allocate supreme authority to religious bodies (as in Iran since 1979). In terms of the degree of religious freedom and civil liberties granted to religious and secular groups, some will at least formally allow pluralistic expression of various faiths as well as of atheism (as did Russia before the 1997 Law on Religion), while others will combine limited pluralism with a hegemonic role of one confession (e.g., Russia since 1997). Yet others will be monistic (recognizing one legitimate faith; e.g., Shi’a Islam in post-1979 Iran) and exclusivist. Furthermore, some desecularizing regimes are highly coercive, while others are rather liberal. The former use harsh, violent measures to enforce religious norms, including religious policing of public and private life (as was the case under the Taliban rule), while the latter enforce counter-secularizing reforms within a legal framework that excludes coercion to comply with religious norms. Ideologies used to legitimate desecularizing regimes will also vary greatly. Some regimes will impose ideologies derived from resurging religions (e.g., radical Islamism) while others will legitimize counter-secularization by essentially secular ideological means. Examples of a secular ideological legitimation of counter-secularization can be found in political discourse of Russian leaders. Since the early 1990s, they emphasized the importance of Orthodoxy and other traditional religions for improving Russia’s moral climate, curbing crime, solving demographic problems, and enhancing national security. Pitirim Sorokin calls the mentality expressed by such a rhetoric “cynical sensate,” meaning that it cynically seeks spiritual means to achieve persistently materialistic goals of a sensate culture.

Thus, the proposed conceptualization can lead to a multi-dimensional typology of desecularizing regimes. Empirically detected regime types are likely to fall somewhere in between two major types. One is a monistic, exclusivist, and coercive theocracy that legitimates its rule by a political ideology derived from its dominant faith and attempts a total religious transformation of society. An archetypical image of such a regime is the Taliban rule in
Afghanistan. The polar opposite type is a pluralistic, inclusive, and liberal regime that leaves a considerable amount of decision-making and control in the hands of secular authorities which use secular ideologies to legitimate their policies aimed at desecularizing a limited number of social institutions and cultural domains. The post-Soviet Ukraine provides a good illustration of the second type.

A major and yet unanswered theoretical question is what explains variations in desecularizing regimes and their types. Potential explanations may focus on a variety of factors. The first among them is the nature of resurging faiths. Some of them, like Islam, have theologies that traditionally do not presume separation of religious and secular authorities and laws, and envision limited freedom (e.g., in the form of a *dhimmi* status) for the heterodox. Others, like Orthodox Christianity, have developed a theology of a church-state *symphonia* and strongly attached themselves to particular nations (as in Russian, Greek, Serbian, and other Orthodox churches). In such cases, theocratic or hegemonic models are likely to develop, while pluralism and protection of religious and secular minority rights may be nonexistent or limited. On the other hand, counter-secularization driven by the global expansion of Pentecostal and evangelical churches can be expected to unfold along the lines of a more pluralistic model and include the norms of church-state separation that are traditional for these faiths.

Another potential predictor is a religious market’s composition. For instance, greater pluralism of Ukraine’s religious scene, including its three main and competing Orthodox jurisdictions, makes a Russian-style hegemonic arrangement unworkable and opens up opportunities for a pluralistic model with a secular state playing the role of an arbiter and enforcer of the rules regulating religious competition. Other, non-religious factors of regime variation deal with the level of socioeconomic development and historical path dependencies of desecularizing societies. For example, within the same religious-civilizational framework more modernized and functionally differentiated societies may be more resistant to totalitarian and monistic desecularizing projects. Furthermore, societies that were purposefully subjected to a lengthy and thorough secularization (as was Russia) may be expected to exhibit a lasting inertia of secular arrangements which will limit the reach of desecularizing regimes.

Another research issue related to desecularizing regime types is the typology of mass reactions to the regimes’ establishment and functioning. After all, desecularizing socio-political orders will be effective to the extent they succeed in fostering mass adherence to resurgent faiths. A reliable typology of mass reactions is an empirical task. However, a preliminary conceptual schema may...
prove useful for guiding empirical research on the issue. I propose that such a schema can be modeled after Merton’s classification of attitudinal and behavioral types depending on people’s acceptance of normative societal goals and means. Specifically, Merton’s typology differentiates between conformism, innovation, ritualism, retreat, and rebellion as major types. Similar notions can describe reactions to goals and means that desecularizing regimes make normative. Desecularizing regimes, especially rapidly emerging and far-reaching ones, abruptly change dominant normative prescriptions. Religious adherence reemerges as societally normative. For previously secularized, and especially deeply secularized populations, becoming religious is not such an easily achievable goal. Means to this goal are to be provided by religious tradition(s) designated as legitimate by a given counter-secularizing regime. Just as secularist regimes transform religious majorities into disenfranchised minorities, rapid counter-secularization can nearly instantaneously marginalize secular majorities (for instance, the ones socialized under official atheism). A “conformist” reaction to this emerging condition (i.e., the acceptance of both the new goal and the legitimate means to its achievement) is conversion broadly understood to include transition from nonreligiosity to a specific religiosity, or from an amorphous, privately held belief to practicing one of the new regime’s legitimate faiths. An “innovative” reaction involves acceptance of the newly imposed norm of being religious, coupled with rejection of the institutional means (specific organized religion[s]) endorsed by the desecularizing regime. Innovators will, therefore, seek alternative religions. They will join new religious movements, cults and sects, or churches the regime deems illegitimate or “non-traditional.” A “ritualistic” reaction is acceptance of religious means rather than goals. Thus, ritualists will recognize the importance of resurging faiths without becoming their faithful adherents. This is bound to result in the spread of the “belonging without believing” pattern described by Hervieu-Leger. A “rebellion” against the newly imposed normative framework is likely to manifest itself in a total rejection of both the goals and the means of religious adherence. Rebels will, therefore, gravitate toward a staunch, entrenched secularism, including its outright atheist forms. Finally, a “retreat” from the normative pressure of counter-secularization manifests itself in religious indifference. Retreatists endorse neither religious nor secularist norms, but rather work out a worldview and a way of life to which both seem irrelevant.

69. Hervieu-Leger, Religion as a Chain of Memory.
Thus, conversions to “legitimate” faiths, the innovative search for alternative ones, ritualistic “belonging without believing,” religious indifference, and a secularist rebellion can all be expected to develop in reaction to the establishment of desecularizing regimes. Which reactions are statistically prevalent will depend on societal, group, and individual-level conditions preceding desecularization as well as on counter-secularizing regimes’ reach and persistence. For instance, the hegemonic but not totalizing or particularly coercive desecularization of post-atheist Russia has proliferated the ritualistic reaction of belonging without believing accompanied by a relatively small proportion of more genuine conversions. Over 80 percent of Russians describe themselves as Orthodox, including one-half of the non-believers, but proportions of those who combine consistent Orthodox beliefs with regular church attendance measure in single digits.

Analytical Levels, Timeframes, and Their Implications for Desecularization Theory

There are two distinct approaches to research on social change. One focuses on relatively small-scale, short-term social transformations. Another one deals with long-term changes involving entire cultures and social systems. Sociological theories of social change focus primarily on the latter type of transformations.70 This distinction also applies to studies and theories of desecularization as social change. One can focus on resurging religious influences on relatively small social units and look at them in the short run. However, indispensable for developing a generalized theory of desecularization are large-scale, long-term studies of religious resurgences. How large the scales, and how long the terms are supposed to be, remains, of course, a matter of definition. The discussion below suggests that the way we answer these questions has profound implications for theorizing desecularization, its social foundations, and interplay with modernity. To explain why, let us look at possible analytical levels and timeframes of desecularization analysis.

Levels of Analysis

The issue of analytical levels has been addressed in theoretical and methodological discussions of secularization. Chaves distinguished between “laicization” at the societal level (religious authority’s declining impact on societal institutions), “internal secularization”

of religious organizations, and “religious disinvolvment” (individuals’ declining religious beliefs and practices). These concepts correspond to Dobbelaere’s three levels of analysis: macro (societal), meso (organizational), and micro (individual-level).

Such a classification of analytical levels can serve as a point of departure for desecularization research. Yet, I suggest that the classification is somewhat problematic and incomplete. Its problematic aspect and incompleteness deal primarily with the interpretation of the macro (societal) level of religious change. Specifically, it remains unclear what constitutes a “societal” level at which we analyze religion’s influence on society’s other institutions. What are the spatial-temporal boundaries of “societal” units we should focus on at the macro level? How large and lasting should the units be for us to understand whether a societal desecularization (or secularization for that matter) is taking place? Do we mean countries, regions within countries, or larger formations, such as civilizations? These questions have clear implications for empirically testing theoretical assumptions about secularization and desecularization. Neither Chaves’s nor Dobbelaere’s classifications explicitly address this consequential issue. Their discussions of the societal

73. Also problematic is the interpretation of the micro level. Strictly speaking, individual-level facts are beyond the scope of sociological analysis in general and sociological studies of religion in particular. Sociologists do collect individual-level data, but they do so to analyze processes occurring in large categories of population, groups, and societies. Thus, individual-level data are typically aggregated to detect tendencies prevalent in the populations individuals belong to. In this context, individuals are, to borrow a term from content analysis techniques, “units of count,” whereas “units of analysis” are large human conglomerates, including populations of entire countries, or as is the case in global survey research (e.g., the World Values project), populations of the world’s larger areas. The tendencies describing these populations are measured in terms of numbers of individuals affected by them, but not analyzed at the individual level. And even qualitative studies delving into the lifeworlds of individuals are sociologically relevant to the extent they shed light on social processes occurring in larger populations. Thus, a sociologically more accurate term to denote this analytical level is perhaps “populations-level” analysis. A sociologically more appropriate use of the term “micro” analytical level deals with religious change (in our case, counter-secularization) occurring in micro-size social structures. These include families, informal small groups (e.g., workplace prayer groups) as well as more formally institutionalized entities, religious congregations included. The micro-level analysis captures counter-secularization’s supra-individual components that are non-deducible from, or reducible to, religious transformations in individuals forming the micro-structural units.
level revolve around abstract notions such as “a modern society” while the provided factual illustrations mostly deal with nation-states, be it Iran, France, Belgium, or others. Granted, social scientists commonly deal with country-specific data sources, and, consequently, it is convenient to compartmentalize analyses of religious change by country. Moreover, evidence we typically use to explore secularization and desecularization is itself a product of the modern state and its institutions. This includes, for instance, archival materials, census data, and other statistical accounts (the word statistics is a derivative from “state”). Yet, the nature of evidence aside, what are the conceptual reasons for focusing macro-level secularization analyses on interactions between religion and other institutions within nation-states?

Arguments can be made both for and against focusing societal-level analyses on states-level units. In favor of such an analytical strategy, one can refer to the fact that states impose political authority structures and normative frameworks controlling and regulating all institutions that function within their borders, which includes religion, economy, polity, education, and so on. Thus, it is only natural to look at how religion interacts with other institutions within a politico-territorial complex of a given state. There are, however, at least two serious arguments against such an approach. The first one is a well-known critique of “methodological nationalism,” the perception of society and state as coextensive which leads to interpreting states as “containers” of societal systems. The fixation on nation-states as analytical units impedes proper consideration of the increasingly influential trans-national, global forces. I will temporarily set aside this globalization-theory argument but will return to it later in this essay. Right now let us consider another argument against limiting societal-level analyses to states’ boundaries. States in the Weberian sense (as territorial monopolies on the use of force) are relatively recent phenomena. Even more recent are nation-states that derive their legitimacy from the mythology of nations as horizontal fraternal communities. Thus, focusing societal-level analyses on institutional systems “contained” within states’ (and especially nation-states’) limits the time frame in which we can understand secularization and desecularization to recent modern history. By contrast, religions whose changing societal influences we seek to explore are typically more ancient and lasting formations. Compare, for instance, the durations of histories of Catholicism and of the state of

75. This notion is based on Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (New York: Verso, 1983).
Poland, of Orthodoxy and modern Greece, or of Islam and Saudi Arabia. Religions’ lasting influences shape the evolving civilizational frameworks in which modern states have relatively recently formed. The frameworks comprise systems of religiously influenced institutions, collective representations, and material substrata configurations which precede the emergence of modern states and parts of which the latter inherit and modify.\textsuperscript{76} The frameworks constitute, thus, societal systems of a different scope and durability than those “contained” within the boundaries of modern states. Focusing secularization and desecularization analysis on religions’ changing impact on these societal systems is (at least) no less legitimate and important than concentrating on those operating at the state level. Moreover, paradigmatic theoretical arguments concerning secularization, such as the works of Comte and Weber, looked at social change within Western civilization and beyond rather than within national boundaries. Similarly, the scope of Berger’s desecularization thesis is civilizational and global rather than state level.

Not that I argue against societal-level analyses limited to specific states. Such analyses are in many cases justified, especially when they deal with religious influences specific to the political context of one nation. However, I suggest a conventional distinction between two kinds of societal-level analysis of secularization and desecularization. One focuses on religions’ influences on societal systems operating within the boundaries of nation states. I will retain Dobbelaere’s term “macro” to denote this analytical level. The second one explores religions’ influences coextensive with the geographic scope and historical durability of civilizations. In tune with the “micro–meso–macro” classification, I propose the term “mega” to describe this analytical level.

\textit{Implications from Shifting Analytical Timeframe to a Mega Level}

As preceding discussion has suggested, macro and mega analytical levels involve different timeframes for exploring religious and social change. For instance, a macro-level study of secularization and desecularization observable in modern European states would be temporally limited to the last few centuries. A study of the same processes within Western Christian civilization would

\textsuperscript{76} For instance, modern Western states have variably secularized normative frameworks for marriage, but the prevalence of monogamous family reflects their more ancient Christian roots. European states have expansive national university systems, but the institution of university is a much earlier product of Christian civilization, and so on.
have to go back nearly two thousand years. Switching from a macro to a mega timeframe will have substantive implications for theorizing the trajectories and social foundations of religious change.

Implication 1: Unidirectional or Cyclical Change?. Switching to a mega-level timeframe may make us to rethink customary assumptions about the direction and trajectory of religious change. Consider the following metaphorical example. Suppose there is a gigantic pendulum that takes hundreds upon hundreds of years to complete one cycle of its semicircular movement with its lowest point in the middle. Now imagine an observer who looks at the pendulum as it approaches the lowest point of its semicircular trajectory. If the observer applies a limited timeframe (of, say, two hundred years) to make sense of what is going on, s/he is likely to end up with a story of a recent linear descent. The trajectory the observer will quite honestly report will likely be a downwardly directed straight line, which, in relation to the pendulum’s actual curve will be like a tangent drawn near a semicircle’s lowest point. It will be difficult for the observer to envision the observed descent as a fragment of a much longer cyclical movement which is about to enter into its ascending phase. To an extent, our reports about secularization (and desecularization) are somewhat similar to the hypothetical observer’s honest but shortsighted account. The reports are usually about relatively recent and more or less linear tendencies. Empirical social scientists have debated, for instance, if, to what extent and why Europe and/or America have become more secular in the last fifty-sixty years (if the debate involves survey data) or, at most, in the last two and one-half centuries (when historical data are used). Meanwhile, mega-historical perspectives on religious change would help us question the popular assumptions of linearity and unidirectionality. However, such perspectives are almost completely abandoned.

Specifically, nearly absent from contemporary debates are mega-historical models that trace civilizations’ cycles of birth, rise, fall, and death (as in Oswald Spengler’s work) or cyclical oscillations between ideational and sensate sociocultural systems (as in Sorokin’s research). Establishing what caused these paradigms’ extinction could be the subject of an important separate study.

77. Curiously, even Parsons’s linear-evolutionary mega-model has been largely abandoned ever since it gave birth to so much modernization and secularization theorizing.

78. One could speculate that the abandonment of Spengler and Sorokin has a lot to do with contemporary sociology’s suicidal self-separation from general history, its “methodological fetishism” (an obsession with sophistication of research techniques at the expense of substance; see Peter L. Berger, “Whatever
It appears, however, that, whatever its causes, their abandonment has resulted in a marked impoverishment of sociological imagination as it applies to understanding the trajectories and social correlates of religious change. Therefore, bringing these approaches back into the sociological mainstream can breathe new life into secularization and desecularization theories. This applies primarily to Sorokin whose work, unlike Spengler's, is decidedly sociological and richly empirical. As was already mentioned, particularly relevant to understanding the nature of religion’s changing societal role is Sorokin’s pendulum-like model of fluctuations between ideational and sensate systems. For him, the growing dominance of a sensate culture in the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries (the period we usually associate with secularization) in the West parallels a similar epoch that the Greco-Roman world had experienced from third through first centuries BC, and that was followed by a crisis and transition to an ideational system that became dominant from the fifth through twelfth centuries. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Sorokin diagnosed a profound crisis of Western sensate culture and its entrance into a transition phase marked by resurging ideational influences. This vision resonates strongly with what half a century later was termed desecularization.

Implication 2: The Immanent Dynamics of The Secularization–Desecularization Cycle. Looking at religion in the timeframe of the last several centuries, early macro-theories of secularization in the West inevitably saw it as co-occurring and increasing with societal modernization. It has been tempting, therefore, to interpret the former as a reflection of the latter. Hence attributions of secularization to modern social processes and forces external to religion (e.g., general functional differentiation, economic growth leading to greater existential certainty, the rise of modern science, and so on) have become prominent. Remarkably, a symmetrical argument has recently developed that sees modernity as externally causing desecularization. Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler have summarized existing versions of this recent argument by listing as many as seven reasons why modernity is “causing the resurgence of religion.”

Happened to Sociology?” First Things 126 [October 2002]: 127–29), ever narrowing research specializations, and a secularist aversion to theories presuming that surging religions can play a constructive, culture- and civilization-building role, while religious declines can spell societal crises.

79. Sorokin, Social and Cultural Dynamics.
establishes a link between modernity and desecularization but does not imply a straightforward causation of the latter by the former.

By contrast, from the perspective of Sorokin’s mega-historical model, neither secularization nor desecularization are unique to modernity or caused by it. The decline and resurgence of religion’s societal impact may take historically unique forms in the modern era. Yet in their essence, they are two inseparable phases of a historically recurring cycle rooted in the immanent dynamics of sociocultural systems. A return to ideational culture (i.e., the one centering on beliefs in the supernatural) occurs when a boundless expansion of destructive, nihilistic trends of the sensate system comes to threaten people’s very existence and coexistence. Thus, the expansion of sensate culture (involving a decline of religion’s societal influence) results in a return to the ideational (involving religion’s resurgence). Thus, neither decline nor resurgence of religion’s influence on society and culture are caused externally (e.g., by modernity). Rather, we are dealing with immanent dynamics of sociocultural cycles.

Here Sorokin’s ideas are remarkably congruent with what leading sociologists of religion with very different theoretical orientations, specifically Stark, Bainbridge, and Finke on the one hand, and Peter Berger on the other, have asserted half a century later. Stark and his co-authors, in particular, have argued theoretically and demonstrated empirically that secularization is self-limiting and generates the countervailing processes of revival and religious innovation. The difference between this thesis and Sorokin’s is that the former limits analysis to processes intrinsic to the religious sphere proper and specific church-sect dynamics within it, while the latter implies cycles of religious decline and revival encompassing entire sociocultural systems. Yet in both versions we are dealing with immanent, non-external change-producing forces. Similar are also underlying theoretical assumptions about humans’ unfading demand for other-worldly, supernatural foundations of belief and action. It is this demand that drives people away from worldly religions and into other-worldly sects in Stark’s analyses, and from the

82. Ibid., 13. Berger remarks, in passing and parenthetically, that there were earlier, pre-modern forms of secularity, such as versions of Confucianism and Hellenic culture. Yet his notion of desecularization revolves around modernity.
hollowness of late sensate culture toward the ideational one in Sorokin’s model. And at this point, both theories converge with Berger’s view of the common foundation of diverse counter-secularizing movements as reactions to modern secular order. The movements, Berger says, express a perennial human quest for transcendental meanings. They react to a secularity they see as taking transcendence away and leaving people in an “impoverished and finally untenable condition.” Thus, the three distinct theoretical orientations converge in their understanding of the secularization–desecularization dynamics and its rootedness in humans’ unending search for transcendence. However, among the three, Sorokin’s theory provides the most general, mega-historical perspective and a framework for comparative study of these dynamics across epochs and civilizations.

What is modernity’s place in the proposed schema? If it does not “cause” secularization and/or desecularization, what is its relationship with these processes? This fundamental question begs book-long answers and is beyond this essay’s limited reach. However, the proposed framework allows us to sketch, albeit very roughly and tentatively, an approach from which some answers can emerge. To simplify this task, the sketch that follows focuses on the original notion of Western (European) modernity and neglects the more complex notion of “multiple modernities.”

Seen within the proposed mega-timeframe, modernity is a relatively recent and short episode in the history of Western Christian civilization. It was preceded by a lengthy development of Christianity. Since causes are supposed to precede effects, it is logical to look at Christianity’s pre-modern history in search for modernity’s sources. From a Weberian perspective, there is hardly anything exotic in trying to detect modernity’s Christian origins. Studies of this nature are ongoing. For instance, modernity’s origins are traced to the nominalist revolution (which, let us note, temporally coincides with the beginning of Sorokin’s “idealist” transition from ideational culture) and subsequent theological reactions to it. Charles Taylor also acknowledges nominalism’s importance, yet emphasizes Reform’s crucial role in secularization and modernity’s rise. Yet, here I propose a less explored path of looking at societal consequences not of particular religious beliefs, but of

their evolving organization into systems maintained by specialized institutional arrangements. For instance, Douglas C. North suggests that the medieval Christian framework, its overall belief structure, and its amenability to evolution were favorable for learning and for adaptations conducive to modern civil liberties and economic growth.\textsuperscript{88} The Church served as the sole repository of learning.\textsuperscript{89} It developed functionally specialized institutions of accumulation and development of knowledge and learning, such as monastery libraries and universities. Stark’s account of the medieval Christian origins of modern science is telling in this regard.\textsuperscript{90} Let us add that the development of functionally specialized institutions indispensable to the accumulation and growth of knowledge and learning was impossible without articulating specialized intellectual roles, such as those of librarians, scholars, and theologians. Moreover, according to Alexander Schmemann, theology in the West, unlike its Eastern Orthodox counterpart, developed as a rationalistic enterprise separated from the context of liturgy at least since the era of scholastics.\textsuperscript{91} It reduced the “ontological symbolism” of early Christian liturgy to a merely “expressive” or “depicting” symbolism, which later was deemed superfluous to true belief in much of Protestantism. Thus, functional differentiation, articulation of specialized intellectual roles, the development of theology institutionally separated from liturgy, and of science from theology, the processes typically attributed to the modern-era secularization, had developed within Christianity before modernity. In this sense, we can talk about an increasing “internal secularization” of pre-modern Christianity. Secularism, as Schmemann wrote, is a stepchild of Christianity, and its development can be traced back at least to the twelfth century.\textsuperscript{92}

From this perspective, a customary view of the modernity–secularization link can be reversed. Instead of assuming that the latter externally induces the former, we can think of Western modernity as an institutional embodiment of the immanently and gradually secularized Christianity. In turn, the institutional “body” further constrains the expressions of its Christian “soul.” Such

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89. Ibid., 130.
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a reinterpretation is, a propos, consistent with Sorokin’s theory of immanent sociocultural change. As secularization culminates in late modernity, opposite, counter-secular tends become increasingly visible. Thus, modernity is not a “cause” of desecularization, but rather the point of departure of its present historical form and a fertile ground for its progression. The desecularization of modern society, however, may be as gradual and lengthy as was the centuries-long advent of modern secularity or the transition from late Roman “sensate” secularity to the Christian “ideational” era. Or it may develop faster by taking advantage of the modern means of mass media and mass education that were not available to desecularizing actors in pre-modern epochs. In any case, sociologists of religion cannot produce immediate “proof” that a complete desecularization has indeed occurred. They can, however, monitor emerging and expanding counter-secularizing trends and their societal impact.

Multiple, Overlapping, and Clashing Desecularizations

Just as recent theory acknowledged the existence of “multiple modernities” and “many globalizations,” we need to recognize the plurality of desecularization processes worldwide. Some sources of “multiple desecularizations” dealing with varying religious sources and societal environments of counter-secularizing regimes were already discussed above. However, in addition to cross-religious and cross-national variability, different but overlapping and potentially conflicting counter-secularizing impulses can develop within the same religious and national context. Charles Taylor’s periodization of West’s transition to a “secular age” is helpful for understanding the origins of this multiplicity and conflicts. His point of departure is an ideal-typical “Ancien Regime,” an integrated, vertically organized, faith-based universe with God at its helm, monarchs and lords below Him, and individuals firmly embedded in parishes at the bottom. The Ancien Regime’s collapse is followed by the Age of Mobilization (1800–1960), when secular forces and ideologies clash with their religious competitors in a struggle for defining the principles of society’s horizontal reintegration. Then comes the Age of Authenticity, at the center of which is individualistic pursuit of authentic self-expression. In the religious sphere, it leads to either seeking new kinds of spirituality or to voluntarily submitting oneself to a traditional authority.

From this perspective, counter-secular movements of the Age of Mobilization are likely to embrace and act upon organicistic religious ideologies of mass mobilization and horizontal integration (e.g., ideologies of religious nationalism). By contrast, counter-secular movements of authenticity will result in the proliferation of new religious currents and/or revitalization of highly conservative and traditionalist groups not necessarily concerned with national integration or other “horizontal” ideologies. Can such movements occur simultaneously? Casanova asserts that at least in Western Europe, the age of “reactive organicism,” including secular–religious and clerical–anticlerical cultural and political warfare, is over. Yet, his assessment may not apply to less and unevenly modernized settings where the mobilization agenda remains relevant for segments of society and political elite, while other groups already gravitate to individualistic authenticity patterns of religious quest and expression. This describes, at least to an extent, the situation in Poland and, even more so, in Russia, where reactionary religious nationalists and those embracing tradition in search for spiritual authenticity have offered conflicting visions of the societal roles of Catholicism and Orthodoxy, respectively. Additionally, within the authenticity camp, tensions can and do emerge among those who choose the paths of religious innovation and traditionalism.

Upon globalization’s entrance, the picture of overlapping and clashing counter-secularizations becomes even more complicated. Globalization leads to a global spread of transnational communities, real and imagined. Drawn to the communities are people and groups from variably modernized and individualized national settings. Previously unthinkable patterns emerge as a result. Second- and third-generation British citizens from middle-class families satisfy their need for authentic religious belonging by joining jihad in the Middle East. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches that are among the most influential agents of globalization assert patterns of modern civil and economic behavior and religious autonomy in socioeconomically backward settings. Some of these churches from Africa establish branch parishes in Western Europe. Christian missionaries from Korea are detained in war-torn Afghanistan. What we see in such cases is the development of multiple and competing counter-secularization forces.

that may fuse mobilization and authenticity currents into powerful transnational movements.

Conclusion

This essay has offered an analytical framework for comparative studies of desecularization processes, forces, patterns, regimes, and historical trajectories. It is my hope that the concepts offered will prove useful for the much needed systematic comparative research on desecularization. In particular, the proposed multidimensional definition specifies desecularization’s component processes involving a full spectrum of social facts, from collective representations crystallized in culture’s symbolic systems and institutional norms to society’s material substrata. The definition may serve as a foundation for developing a set of empirical indicators for comparatively assessing the scope of desecularization processes across societies. Similarly, the proposed definitions and typologies of counter-secularizing actors, patterns, regimes, and reactions to them can be employed in comparative studies of desecularization’s political and ideological dynamics. Furthermore, while the essay does not (and was not intended to) offer a theory of desecularization, its concepts can be utilized as building blocks for developing such a theory. A valid theory can develop by integrating generalizations derived from comparative studies of the world’s multiple desecularizations (the concept introduced in the last section). The presented reconsideration of analytical levels and timeframes will hopefully contribute to clearing some conceptual hurdles on the road to theory development. In particular, the essay proposed bringing the largely abandoned mega-historical perspectives back into the mainstream of research on religions’ declines and resurgences. This would logically lead us to revising customary interpretations of the nexus between modernity, secularization, and desecularization. This would also enable us to theorize the immanent dynamics of the cycles of secularization and desecularization. Finally, it is my hope that this paper has shown the possibility and necessity of integrating ideas coming from divergent and rivaling schools of classical and contemporary sociology in order to understand desecularization’s social origins, patterns, and consequences.